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From Cyberspace to the Classroom: Using E-mail to Enhance the EFL Environment

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Abstract

Making e-mail a mandatory part of EFL coursework will ensure that students become familiar with the *Hannan Internet Community Tool for E-Education*. This may help students ease into other courses where this site must be utilized, allow them to retrieve campus information and familiarize them with using the university electronic mail system. Some students, who may not otherwise check the site, may get used to accessing it and receive a more satisfying university experience by allowing them to keep in touch with campus events. E-mail exchange on this site will encourage students to become more computer literate in a technological age while also developing fluency in the L2.

本稿では、E-mail を利用した新しい英語学習法とその可能性について、以下の4点を中心に論じる。1) E-mail を利用したライティング添削指導。2) HINT システムのより効果的な活用法。3) コンピュータリテラシーの育成。4) 学習意欲の向上。

Introduction

We live in an age where e-mail has become both a standard form of personal communication and a necessity in the workplace. It makes sense that EFL educators begin to take advantage of e-mail exchange with their learners in order to prepare them to communicate well in the target language. It is not merely that learners can improve their skills from the actual practice of e-mail writing, but that their confidence and speaking skills in L2 situations can be boosted from this practice (Kim and Keller, 2008). Participating in e-mail exchange can foster student empowerment and learner autonomy, which promotes student interest and motivation in the target language (Hui-Fang, 2005). This paper will discuss how using e-mail can be beneficial to support learning in the EFL classroom.

Benefits of Using E-mail Over Other Forms of Writing

Although writing assignments are traditionally done by paper and pencil, educators may find e-mail assignments to be more convenient and easier to organize. E-mail is automatically supplied with submission dates and times, so adherence to due dates as well as the ability to follow assignment length, format and other criteria, can be easily assessed. When giving feedback on assignments, instructors may reply with a new e-mail, thus creating a “dialogue” on the assignment topic. Depending on assignment purpose, feedback may be made electronically in the form of general comments on content, writing style, grammar and/or use of language. These corrected e-mail messages are as convenient as lecture notes for students because they can be stored and referred to at a later time (Hassini, 2006). E-mail users can compensate for the lack of face-to-face contact by including informal verbal features (Tao and Reinking,

1996) such as bold type, stylized punctuation or pictorial icons. The instructor may supply feedback with a new e-mail message and include special fonts and/or highlighted text to display corrections that can be easily viewed and understood by the learner.

As there is no need for the exchange of actual papers, the possible loss of homework assignments (on the part of either student or teacher) is eliminated. Students will benefit from practicing how and when to save and delete drafts and documents so they can be redone and resent if needed. Electronic submissions are efficient because the creation, submission and feedback of an assignment can all be done by computer, making the written submission form obsolete. This may be a particularly positive point for teachers and students concerned with paper waste and/or poor penmanship. Feedback is best taken when instructor replies are prompt and model the instructor's own criteria for the e-mail assignments (Gonglewski, Meloni and Brant, 2001).

With the regular practice of e-mail writing, learners are honing their keyboarding skills as well as their proficiency to use e-mail for social and possibly for future academic and career situations. E-mail is a particularly good form of writing to be used by low-level learners because they may write in first person about personal topics and experiences, and submit them in a shorter and less rigorous form than academic writing. E-mail is a good method for low-level students to practice paragraph writing, which is a key step in learning how to write formal essays. One reason to use e-mail as an add-on to a language course is because it “excites, motivates and encourages writing” (Nagel, 1999). Another reason is because it can increase the amount of speaking output in the classroom.

Using Written E-mail to Support Oral Communication

By deciding what title is placed in the subject line, understanding what salutations and end greetings to use, and creating content appropriate for the body of the electronic messages, learners are developing their actual English e-mail writing skills. More importantly, when learners are practicing e-mail exchange, they are also simultaneously becoming empowered to use the target language orally (Nagel, 1999). Speaking, like writing, consists of the same cognitive steps: understanding topic, forming opinion or content to be expressed, and delivery. When using the conversational written form, the anxiety factor is broken down because learners have time to reflect at length and even change what they want to convey before delivery. In the classroom or other L2 situations, the learner is expected to handle dialogue immediately where a large window of error is possible and where learner self-confidence is challenged. If learners are given an opportunity to practice L2 communication in a non-threatening environment first, they will be more likely to try to express themselves confidently and successfully in a higher risk situation at a later time. Because e-mail exchanges resemble oral communication, low level learners will inadvertently begin to understand the pattern of conversational dialogue through e-mail: set a topic, make a comment or ask a question, and continue until both sides reach a satisfying conclusion to the topic. E-mail is a medium where learners can feel safe to express themselves because they are not called on for immediate language production. E-mail is a decelerated form of conversation where learners are not pressured to think and communicate on demand: “the secure environment through one-on-one e-mail exchange with the teacher helps learners gain self-assurance as well as experience using the electronic media in the foreign language” (Gonglewski, Meloni and Brant, 2001).

As e-mail exchange can be kept private, learners do not have the pressure of speaking in front of their peers, which can be a daunting experience if a learner acknowledges his or her own overall proficiency, or even a particular skill such as pronunciation, to be low. Since the shyness factor is heightened in learners who are self-conscious about their pronunciation and intonation abilities, e-mail will allow them to have an opportunity to express themselves fully, without having the added pressure of worrying about language errors or how they sound to the listener. As students gradually begin to feel success at communicating through writing, they may begin to feel more adept and willing to communicate in a face-to-face setting. E-mail communication can be seen as a pre-practice for real conversation, a method to give learners the motivation to take language risks in the classroom. "Shyness, embarrassment, difficulty or fear of expressing one's self-- even in first language-- represent considerable hurdles to successful language acquisition and use. E-mail or networked communication represents a means of interpersonal communication which, due to its physical and/or temporal characteristics can reduce these psychological barriers" (Absalom and Marden, 2004). As a large percentage of lower level EFL classrooms in Japan consist of introverted learners and learners with low self-confidence and low motivation levels (Cummings, 2004), e-mail can be a good communicative path to raise learner self-confidence and motivation to speak in the L2.

Integrating e-mail technology into a language course encourages learner autonomy, which is one of the first and most important steps to language acquisition (Sabieh, 2002). The more learners take initiative by either speaking out in class, or by engaging in L2 activities, such as sending and receiving e-mail in the target language outside of class, the more learners are claiming autonomy in the L2. As learners have more time to formulate their thoughts when writing than when speaking, they will be more likely to take advantage of a range of resources to learn from, such as dictionaries, textbooks and internet sites (Absalom and Marden, 2004). The task of e-mailing is not a passive act, so whenever an individual learner is making an effort to create and send an e-mail, he or she is taking the initiative and responsibility over his or her own learning.

Improving the Teacher / Student Relationship through E-mail Exchange

Two large threats to motivation in a language class are when the course itself is a requirement, not an elective, and when there is a lack of personalized instructor attention to each student (Kim and Keller, 2008). In especially larger classrooms, which meet only once a week, students have very little time to speak directly with their instructor. "One of the challenges in motivating students in large undergraduate lecture classes arises from the difficulty in establishing personal contact with them and making them feel that their individual needs, interests and goals are being addressed by the instructor" (Kim and Keller, 2008). As e-mail may be used regardless of restrictions on time and place, the instructor may create the opportunity to communicate personally with each learner. E-mail exchange allows each learner dialogue time with the teacher which is not always possible from week to week on campus.

Communicating in the L2 with another L2 learner may create a feeling of anxiety or awkwardness for some learners. E-mail exchange with a native speaker is especially motivating and appealing to learners who find in-class pair or group work with their L2 peers to be too artificial (Gonglewski, Meloni and Brant, 2001). "One of the basic aims for language teaching is to help students speak or write more communicatively with less anxiety. For this purpose, on-campus e-mail can be utilized so as to allow

students to communicate with their teachers” (Miyao, 1996). An improvement in the teacher/student relationship and a more positive classroom environment in which to function can ensue from the e-mail exchange time outside of class. As teacher/student relationships improve, teacher trust, learner comfort level in the classroom and improved interest and motivation in the subject matter will also improve.

As a goal of any language educator is to aid improvement and heighten learner interest in the L2, the educator would find it beneficial to spend time not merely on imparting knowledge about the subject, but also in cultivating the teacher/student relationship (Sheer and Fung, 2007). Doing so will allow educators to understand why some learners are not functioning satisfactorily in the classroom. As there is not always time for the educator to understand why some students show a reluctance to participate in L2 activities, e-mail may be used to counsel or advise learners on how they can better improve their ability or interest in the subject (Hassini, 2006). Some students may seek advice by e-mail on ways to improve their language skills, though they may be reluctant or too intimidated to ask questions during or after class. E-mail communication can reduce the teacher-student “status differential” (Sheer and Fung, 2007), making students more likely to communicate and confide in their teachers.

Creating a Positive Classroom Environment From the Cyber Environment

A common perception of the classroom is as a place for traditional learning, a place where judgment (by the teacher and by peers) takes place, and this can be upsetting for the well being of the student (Sabieh, 2002). Introverted learners in particular may feel uneasy in a language classroom where speaking activities are required. Extroverted learners and learners who are confident in their L2 ability easily dominate class conversation time. E-mail, however, may serve as a way to equalize learners and create fairness in relation with the teacher. Particularly shy, introverted or troubled students may find their voice through writing, allowing the teacher to be more sensitive or aware of why they are not participating during class time. Student to teacher e-mail exchange gives learners a pressure-free communicative outlet. Learners “who feel uncomfortable for either cultural reasons or because of anxiety about speaking in classroom contexts may find a freedom to interact on the internet... others may feel liberated from the traditional structures of the classroom” (Bloch, 2002). The following is an example of a particularly introverted student who was unwilling to socialize with his peers in both L1 and L2, but was keen on participating in teacher-student e-mail exchange:

“I was always alone and I had few friends to be able to talk whatever I thought. Because I spent similar days, I felt lonely... From now on, I want to work part-time and to get new friends and money there so that I could be better university life of mine.”

After an e-mail exchange encouraging him to join a university circle to meet new people and showing sympathy that he did not find university life completely satisfying, the student appeared to develop more trust in the teacher and was less hesitant to participate in class activities. He, however, appeared to remain reluctant to form new friendships with his classmates. Some learners may find it beneficial to use e-mail writing as a minor method of stress relief, which could improve learner behavior and the general quality of the learner’s university life. E-mail communication may serve as an extra pathway for educators to understand learner frustrations and hear complaints. The following student’s e-mail was her attempt to both apologize for her reluctance to participate in the L2 while giving her opinion about the schedule of

Oct. 2008

From Cyberspace to the Classroom

university classes:

“In high school, classes was fifty minutes. University classes are one hour half minutes. Too long. I get sleepy. Sorry, teacher!!”

Although this student’s classroom manner changed very little throughout the year, after this e-mail exchange, she was more open to encouragements to be more active in the L2 because she admitted in writing that she lacked the ability to pay attention for an entire lesson. E-mail may also be a way for learners to appeal to educators, improving the relationship from the learner’s perspective. The following student who had high oral/aural ability, but poor attendance at the beginning of the semester used his e-mail to practice the previous class lesson on expressing reasons to go abroad while also apologizing for not purchasing the required textbook:

“So I have to study hard and enjoy university life. First, I have to work and make money. And I will go to Saudi Arabia to search for oil... It’s joking! But if I will be rich man, I will buy one thousand textbooks. I’m sorry for not buying textbook yet. ”

After an e-mail exchange was made praising the student’s use of humor in the L2, together with a warning that the lack of regular attendance and failure to bring the required textbook to class results in failure of the course, the student’s attendance became steady and the textbook purchase was finally made (with additional complaint in the L2 during the following class that the cost of tuition and textbooks was burdening).

E-mail is not only a medium for learners to practice writing in the L2, it is a social outlet that can strengthen the teacher-student bond. “A professor may use e-mail to develop good relationships with students by engaging in social topics such as hobbies and interests, discussing extra curricular activities, or disclosing personal problems” (Sheer and Fung, 2007). As a teacher gets to know and understand learners better, gradually building trust and comfort in the L2, classroom management will become easier and language learning can be done at a more effective pace.

Conclusion

E-mail can be used to support or add to the set curriculum, enhancing a course in speaking or communication by allowing students to practice communicative discourse in the written form outside of the classroom. Speaking activities that take place in the classroom may be made more effective if students are able to build their confidence and motivation to use the L2 in the relatively risk-free cyber environment first. E-mail exchange in the target language allows the learner to practice authentic language in a minimal-pressure situation before attempting to use it in a classroom or other L2 situation. E-mail exchange can also strengthen the relationship between teacher and students, making the classroom environment a more positive place for learning. As a comfortable atmosphere is more likely to motivate in-class participation, classroom management will become easier and will allow for a better pace and flow of L2 activities. Utilizing e-mail exchange in an EFL course can create an upward cycle of improved teacher-student relations, improved learner confidence and motivation and, therefore, a quicker improvement of learner L2 skills.

Unfortunately, some educators may be reluctant to introduce technology into language lessons for fear of the inability to cope with computer assistance, for fear of the competition of technology, or even for fear of being replaced by it (Sabieh, 2002). E-mail, however, should be valued as a useful tool that can be used to enrich, not substitute or take-over, the activities that happen in the classroom. Engaging in e-mail exchange does not mean that teacher presence in the classroom should be reduced. With the absence of teacher dedication, either online or in the classroom, e-mail technology will not be successful as a method for enhancing EFL learning.

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